

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING THROUGH
THE VISUALLY ANALOGOUS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	
Methodology	
II. ANALYSIS OF ART WORKS	4
III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	17
APPENDIX	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		
1.	<u>Rude Confections</u>	19
2.	<u>Dear Sirs:</u>	19
3.	<u>Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path</u>	19
4.	<u>Saccharin Sentiment: Rabbit</u>	19
5.	<u>Saccharin Sentiment: Home</u>	19
6.	<u>Dinnertime</u>	19
7.	Oblique View-- <u>Dinnertime</u>	19
8.	<u>Everyday Ware</u>	19
9.	<u>Detail--Everyday Ware</u>	19
10.	<u>Detail--Everyday Ware.</u>	19
11.	<u>Commemorative Edition</u>	19

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The decision to utilize images as signs or symbols and not as a means of design, composition, or formal play was the initial point of analysis in my drawing and painting. It is the meaning of images--what they connote, what they denote, and their allusions to larger more significant cultural issues--that is of interest to me. Susanne Langer said " . . . any item that is to have meaning must be employed as a sign or symbol: that is to say, it must be a sign or symbol to someone."¹

In order for me to utilize an image as sign or symbol, I had to re-evaluate my formal methods of depicting an image. Until the time of my graduate work I took Modernists' concerns as a natural part of art-making. Design, composition, and emphasis on paint and surface were a matter of habit to me and not conscious decision-making. Thus, I began the process of purging these manners from my work and subsequently arrived upon a method of describing imagery as signs or symbols which I felt was effective. As

¹Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 51.

stated earlier, my interest in images is a result of the meanings they convey. So my next approach, with intentions of conveying a broader range of connotations and denotations, was to establish a specific analogy between the images. I found that the intent of a specific analogous relationship between the images added the possibility of enlightenment or surprise. The challenge became finding a visual analogy that truly amplified the meanings of all images without being too vague or too obvious. This approach to image-making proved more strategic in pointing the viewer to a more specific intention or reading.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In my Problem in Lieu of Thesis I explored the use of analogy in my work. I searched for ways to heighten the difference or distance between the imagery within an analogous relationship and yet maintain meaningful similarities or relationships. An analogy, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as the following: "a similarity or likeness between things in some circumstances or effects, when the things are otherwise entirely different."² The following questions were addressed to each piece of work:

1. In what way does the arrangement of the images on the picture plane affect meaning within the analogy?

²Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, (1983), s.v. "analogy."

2. In what way does the number of images affect meaning within the analogy?
3. In what way does change of scale affect meaning within the analogy?
4. In what way do found materials or non-traditional art materials affect meaning within the analogy?
5. Is the analogy changed or heightened when three-dimensional elements are used?
6. Is the analogy changed or heightened when used within the context of an installation or environment?

METHODOLOGY

I executed eight pieces of art work and recorded my process and exploration in a journal. Each piece was described and analyzed according to the questions stated above.

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF ART WORKS

When I began the written analysis of my work, I realized that in my Statement of the Problem I presumed the presence of a visual analogy in each work produced. That was my intention with the creation of each work. But, I continued to ask myself: What properties need to be present to create a visual analogy? Is my own subjective assessment of an image as a sign or symbol valid? An analogy, as indicated by its definition, necessitates a comparison between elements. So, my intention was to present elements, be they images or materials, that were distinctly and presumably different, out-of-context, or in some way forced into a questionable relationship with each other. In many instances I have searched for images or materials that connote some implication about femininity or gender related issues in the home or in the arts and tried to re-present that image or material in a deconstructed manner opening a discourse for challenge and evaluation. Only after reaching that point did I address the questions in my Statement of the Problem to each piece of work.

The first piece I executed as a part of my problem was Rude Confections (figure 1). It consists of a fiberglass

screen stretched onto a wooden frame. An image of a running man is painted on the screen. Painted directly behind the screen on the wall is an illusionistic image of a slice of cherry pie. The screen image is painted black, but because it is painted on screen, the wall image can be viewed simultaneously. As a result, they occupy parallel planes.

I feel that the stacking of images is significant to the piece. There are two images, yet one does not take precedence because both must be viewed simultaneously. They are forced into an analogous relationship by their visual interaction.

The connotation of the materials and the connotation of the images contribute to the meaning within the relationship. I chose the fiberglass screen because it alludes to window screens, and I chose to expose the wooden frame because it alludes to house building. Both allusions represent properties or building materials common to a house or home. The images also carry meaning. I intended for the man to represent a burglar running from a crime, or more generally, he might represent a violation of any kind. The cherry pie, in contrast, signifies food, nurturing, pleasure, and comfort.

Dear Sirs: (figure 2) has similar formal characteristics to Rude Confections. It consists of a floral pattern painted on a fiberglass screen stretched onto a wooden frame and a letter written in shorthand painted

directly on the wall. The letter written in shorthand provides a background behind and surrounding the stretched fiberglass screen. Like Rude Confections the screen allows the pattern painted on the wall to be viewed simultaneously with the pattern painted on the screen.

The arrangement of the images was dictated singularly by the repetition of image as pattern. The number and scale of images was significant to me only in that repetition of an image in whatever scale or quantity forms pattern.

The relationship between the shorthand as pattern and the floral motif as pattern points to the intended meaning within the analogy. They are different in that one is language and the other mere decoration, but they are similar in that they both form pattern, and they both relate to activities associated with women. Shorthand is, of course, a language used by secretaries, an occupation I associate with women. Floral patterning alludes to textiles, the lower or applied arts, or an art form I also associate with women.

My next piece entitled Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path (figure 3) represents a 6x6' simulation of a quilt in stainless steel. Actually, the piece consists of sixteen 18x18" stainless sheets, each installed directly onto the wall flush together. I selected an archetypal quilting pattern entitled Drunkard's Path and reduced it to a positive and negative image area. Then, using a commercial

sandblaster, I achieved a matted surface in the negative areas while leaving unaltered the shiny or positive areas.

The arrangement and quantity of images and the scale of the piece were directed by my desire to simulate the properties of an actual quilt. The property I chose to eliminate, the fabric, has been replaced by a non-traditional or industrial material, stainless steel. I feel that this affects the meaning within the analogy that is created between the imagery and the material. Stainless steel carries an entirely different set of connotations than those normally associated with fabric. The first is hard, cold, and impersonal; the second is warm, comforting, and protective.

Sandblasting also carries meaning. It is a process associated with industrialization and commercialization; quilt-making is a process associated with domesticity and femininity. In essence I have attempted to re-present a quilt, stripping it of one set of connotations, and imbuing it with another.

After completing Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path, I was eager to produce other sandblasted imagery. The next two pieces, Saccharin Sentiment: Rabbit (figure 4) and Saccharin Sentiment: Home (figure 5), share the same formal qualities. They differ only in imagery. Both consist of 9x9' pieces of stainless steel with a centralized silhouetted image sandblasted onto the surface. The first

piece contains an image of a rabbit; the second contains an image of a house. The imagery is created in a single value, the sandblasted surface, while the background is an unaltered value or surface, the shiny stainless steel. Both images are designed on a grid, meaning there are no curved or diagonal edges, only vertical and horizontal edges.

I feel that the analogy in these two works was created in the same manner as in Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path. The two elements to be compared within an analogous relationship are the image and the material, not as in Rude Confections and Dear Sirs:, two different images.

I appropriated the rabbit image and the house image from needlepoint imagery. Their association to needlepoint is of significance to me, thus the reason for maintaining the needlepoint grid. The attraction to needlepoint imagery is the sentiment solicited by needlepoint itself. I believe it alludes to domestic attitudes that are sometimes superficial, false, or nostalgic. I have robbed the imagery of its connotations by the denial of its inherent formal properties: thread and fabric. Instead, I have imbued the imagery with the formal properties of stainless steel, a material which carries completely different connotations than thread and fabric. It is hard, cold, and impersonal.

After reflecting on these two pieces, I realize that the grid of needlepoint imagery is also the grid of computerized imagery. In this case I feel the connotations

of the imagery are also in contradiction to the connotations of computerized means of reproduction. I have associated a sentimental image with a cold emotionless technology.

The next piece entitled Dinnertime (figure 6 and 7) consists of an 18" square piece of formica mounted on a wooden frame. On the formica is a centralized silhouetted image of a reclining woman. Mounted into the wall in a row directly above the formica are four artificial three-dimensional pieces of cherry pie. The piece of formica is glossy white with flecks of gold; the image is painted in flat black. The artificial pieces of pie are simulations of actual cherry pie, complete with golden crust and shiny red cherries oozing out the edges.

The number of images in the piece is limited to two: the woman, a two dimensional representation; and the pieces of pie, three-dimensional representations. I initially considered the use of a single piece of pie with the single image. However, repeating the image refers to previous works where repetition is significant to the meaning, such as Dear Sirs: and Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path; and the repetition of four exact duplicates of an object that is normally inconsistent in form, such as food, is interesting to me. This piece is unique in that it contains three-dimensional elements, which I feel add formal intrigue, but I am not certain that they change or heighten the analogy itself.

The analogy that occurs in Dinnertime is the result of three elements: the image of a reclining woman, the pieces of pie, and the formica material. I appropriated the image of a reclining woman from a romance confessional magazine of the 1950s. She is reclining in a codified pose signifying sex or sensuality. Her torso is slightly twisted revealing her curvaceous form; her arms are open wide; and her hair is tossed back and spread on an implied flat surface, perhaps a bed. The cherry pie, as in Rude Confections, carries the connotations of food, nurturing, pleasure, and comfort. A list of descriptors for the words sex and food point to the obvious relationship between the two images. Also, I used formica as the ground on which the image is painted. It is a countertop material common to kitchens, and it heightens the analogy by reinforcing associations to home, gender, and food.

Everyday Ware (figure 8, 9, and 10) is unique to my problem in that it is the first piece that is completely three-dimensional. It is comprised of a 2x3' table, table cloth, table runner, napkins, and two complete place settings of china and flatware. The white table cloth has an added blue fake fur border. The only alteration in the flatware is the blue paint that decorates the wooden handles. The blue and white table runner and the china illustrate the same motif: an arrangement of hearts and children organized into a pattern that appears at first

totally benign. Upon closer inspection the pattern reveals a severe case of sibling rivalry in which a little boy points a gun at his sister's back while she unassumingly lies on the floor with an open book.

The questions this piece address are the use of three-dimensional elements and the use of found or non-traditional art materials, which in this case are very much the same issue. Use of found, but altered, elements consists of the table and the flatware. The table cloth, the table runner, and the china were created specifically for Everyday Ware. I have not denied these elements their original function; I have attempted only to borrow it to give meaning to the piece. The table cloth and the table runner decorate the table; and the china, flatware, and napkins have been correctly placed to make a complete table arrangement. In other words, a table with complete place setting is the work of art.

The aspect that removes Everyday Ware from a simple dinner table arrangement is the imagery on the table runner and china. Because I wanted both elements to be believable, I screenprinted the table runner; and I painted and fired the ceramic plates. As stated earlier, the motif of hearts and children appears benign due to the patterning. The arrangement of flat simple silhouetted shapes in a predetermined and repeated design can easily be termed decorative. Search for other meaning is arrested. I am

relying on the unexpectedness and inappropriateness of the little boy pointing a gun at his sister's back to carry the piece out of its normal context of a happy healthy home and into a disturbing context of underlying jealousy and anger.

It is my intention that an analogous relationship occur between the imagery and the form. In Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path I appropriated the imagery yet altered the form; in Everyday Ware I appropriated the form yet altered the imagery. The form, a dinner table with complete table setting, solicits a sentiment other than that which is solicited by the imagery, a little boy pointing a gun at his sister's back. The first is wholesome, benign, or even sweet; the second is unexpected, disturbed, or perhaps ironic.

The use of ceramic dinner plates in Everyday Ware originated with my desire to incorporate objects from a domestic environment into art. Using ceramic plates as a medium resulted in technical problems because I was unfamiliar with the process. In fact, I re-did the first set of plates in Everyday Ware; the results were unsatisfactory. But, nevertheless, I responded to the dinner plates as a forum for imagery, so I decided to execute another piece with plates. The piece entitled Commemorative Edition (figure 11) contains four ceramic dinner plates with imagery fired into the surface. Each plate is one of four colors: jade, pink, light green, or

lavender. The imagery consists of a silhouetted crouched figure in contraposto. His arms are held away from his body as if used for maintaining balance. In his right hand is a flashlight. I appropriated the figure from a photograph of a burglar lurking outside a potential victim's house. Once silhouetted, the form becomes somewhat ambiguous and assumes a gorilla like posture. Surrounding the figure is a strand of pearls in an oval shape. Pearls also decorate the edge of the fluted plate. I've tried to imply that the figure is a burglar or a jewel thief.

The quantity of plates is of significance to this piece. I chose to execute four because I felt that it was the minimum number necessary to constitute an attractive wall grouping. When I conceived this piece I recalled the commemorative plates I have seen advertised celebrating Presidents, historical events, and even Elvis. What is significant about these plates is that they come in an edition, the implication being that a collection of the available number is necessary to truly honor the person, place, or event. Thus, this was my reasoning for the quantity of four.

This piece is like Everyday Ware in that the form, the dinner plate, enters into an analogous relationship with the imagery. There is an apparent incongruity. Commemorative plates are designed to display an image that one supposedly wants to memorialize. The plates in Commemorative Edition

display an image that is at best ambiguous and at worst representative of threat and deprivation of home and property.

Question number six asks if the analogy is changed or heightened when used within the context of an installation or environment. I have delayed responding to this question until all art work was completed. Only now can I respond to the art work within the context of the installation or environment created in my studio space.

Upon consideration, the term installation needs defining. My first question is whether an installation implies that the art work is site-specific. Two of my pieces, Dear Sirs: and Rude Confections, are definitely site-specific; parts of each piece are painted on the wall. However, they could easily be reproduced in any space or gallery with white walls. The site is not so specific that it is unique, not in the way that Sol LeWitt's Stars with Three-Four-Five-Six-Seven-Eight and Nine Points accommodates the architectural space at the Dallas Museum of Art. The piece encompasses the dimensions of the site and would not have the visual impact in a less grand architectural context.

This brings to mind my next consideration in defining the term installation: context. Must all the pieces of art within an installation be interdependent? I witnessed an installation by Jonathan Borofsky at Paula Cooper Gallery in

1983. The installation provided a forum for cacophony, both visual and audible, thus producing interdependence among all the pieces of art. But, ultimately the pieces of art were removed from the context of the gallery and each other. Did they become meaningless outside the installation? I do not think so, but if I accept interdependence as a criterion for an installation, I have failed to create an installation, for I created each piece with its own intended meaningful analogy. I do feel that as a whole the work is stronger because of the visual interaction. There is an element of mutual support. But, observation leads me to wonder if in an installation where all works of art interact with each other, contributing or amplifying each others' meanings, associations, or connotations, is a specific isolated analogy within each piece of art necessary? Also, perhaps the intention of a specific analogous relationship in each piece is too shortsighted on my part. Perhaps I should allow more room for ambiguity, allowing the viewer to make connections and form his own analogous relationships.

One implication I feel certain of is the repetition of imagery within an installation or environment. Repetition reinforces the image as a sign or symbol, as a carrier of meaning, in addition to reinforcing my commitment to that image. In Dinnertime and in Rude Confections I utilized the representation of cherry pie. The distinction is that in the former work of art the cherry pie is painted

illusionistically; in the latter the cherry pie has become an object, an artificial three-dimensional representation of the image. Not only does the repetition reinforce the image as a carrier of meaning, I believe the juxtaposition of an image in two-dimensional form with the same image in three-dimensional form adds formal intrigue as well. They may also be intriguing from a metaphorical point of view. A three-dimensional object has weight and depth; a two-dimensional image is flat and shallow.

I also feel that the repeated use of images, objects, or materials within an installation or environment that originates from a common source clarifies my intention, my connection to that source. For example, many elements originate from the domestic environment: the window screen in Rude Confections; the quilting image in Quilting Pattern: Drunkard's Path; the formica countertop kitchen material in Dinnertime; and the ceramic plates and table runner in Everyday Ware.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, it is meaning that interests me, the utilization of signs and symbols as conveyors of larger more significant cultural issues. One issue I have addressed is pattern making and its association to women's art. The embellishment of pots, rugs, quilts, and household objects with decoration by women is well documented; it appears in almost every culture in history. Decoration as pattern has been defined as pleasurable, sense oriented, and lacking in meaning. Unfortunately, it has been relegated to the level of minor art.³ I have participated in a criticism that challenges that preconception by appropriating pattern as a carrier of meaning. As in Everyday Ware, I did not utilize decorative ceramic plates and a colorful screen printed table runner because I was interested in mastering the craft involved in the production; I utilized them in order to borrow their original function as objects and thus as conveyors of a specific meaning.

³Katherine Gregor, "The Decorative at Issue," Artweek, 4 June 1988, 1.

I have also attempted to challenge this preconception by combining pattern with an industrial material such as steel. I associate steel with the sculptural tradition established by David Smith and Donald Judd. What I have learned from viewing works by these artists is the appeal of economy. I respond to the simplicity of utilizing a single material as carrier of meaning. I feel this approach is effective in Saccharin Sentiment: Rabbit and Saccharin Sentiment: Home.

When I began the execution of the previously discussed works of art, I was concerned primarily with imagery within an analogous relationship as the conveyor of meaning. But, in summary I must conclude that there is a realm of meaning to be derived not only from imagery within an analogous relationship to other imagery, but also imagery in relationship to materials, objects, and other artistic traditions besides painting. Positioning works of art into a variety of artistic traditions such as textiles, crafts, and sculpture broadens the realm of possibilities. As a result, I am much more intrigued by the analogies that occur between image and form than those that occur between image and image.

APPENDIX























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